Power And Propaganda, The Nazi Rise To Power Essay, Research Paper

Power and Propaganda: The Nazi Rise to Power

While Germany struggled under the massive social and economic burdens left by defeat in World War I, a new political ideal began to take hold – one that would eventually rebuild a crumbled economy and motivate a disparaged people. Through the use of media and propaganda, Adolf Hitler created a totalitarian state unparalleled in the twentieth century. “His was the first dictatorship in the present period of modern technical development, a dictatorship which made complete use of all technical means for domination of its own country”(p.355).

At the end of World War I, Germany was punished harshly by the Allies. Under the Treaty of Versailles, a humiliated Germany was forced to pay heavy reparations to France. These payments, combined with the economic collapse of the Great Depression, opened politics to totalitarian movements (such as communism and socialism) that began to emerge in the early 1920s. Competing with the right-wing communist party, “it was the skill of Hitler and the National Socialist Workers Party (Nazis) in the new politics and propaganda that allowed them to exploit most effectively Germans’ fears and hope to gain power”(p.358). As stated in the text, the Nazis’ extreme nationalist message capitalised on the Young Plan of 1929, which had failed to reduce the war reparation payments to the Allies so deeply resented by Germans. The severity of the Depression also encouraged Germans to look to the strong leadership Hitler claimed to offer (p.359).

As the Nazis climbed to power from the mid-1920s, Hitler increasingly monopolised the use of technology for propaganda. Much of the funding for the Nazi party came from wealthy opponents of the Young Plan, and the Nazis had sufficient funds to exploit modern media completely. Through the use of propaganda, Hitler became omnipresent, dominating German politics. Hitler created an image of organisation and leadership. He identified the party to voters by adopting the swastika as its symbol, and creating the Sturmabteilung (S.A.) as a symbol of new strength for Germany. In doing so, Hitler was able to give voters concrete evidence of his intention to pull Germany out of its current situation, and won wide appeal from people frustrated by national defeat and economic woes.

Hitler recognised that the fundamental theory behind propaganda is that, “it must be addressed always and exclusively to the masses” (source 1, p.364). Much of the resounding success with German voters, evident in 1933 when Hitler became chancellor, can be attributed to his successful use of propaganda. Hitler argued in Mein Kampf that: “the more modest its (propaganda) intellectual ballast, the more exclusively it takes into consideration the emotions of the masses, the more effective it will be (source 1, p.364).

Hitler’s success with the voting public was also a result of the propaganda-created ‘Fuhrer (leader) Myth.’ Nazi political propaganda was so powerful that Hitler came to be seen as the embodiment of the German ideal – a strong, courageous, and brilliant Hitler that personified a restored Germany. As Otto Dietrich wrote on Hitler’s campaign by plane, in which Hitler flew through a rainstorm to attend a rally. Dietrich alluded that Hitler was even more powerful than nature, and therefore god-like:

And yet, what a feeling of security is in us in the face of the elements! The Furher’s absolute serenity transmits itself to all of us. In every hour of danger he is ruled by his granite-like faith in his world-historical mission, the unshakeable certainty that Providence will keep him from danger for the accomplishment of his great task (source 13, p. 374).

The emotional appeal that Hitler engendered was largely due to the Nazis ability to exploit German fears through propaganda. The lack of nationalism was chided in poster campaigns, and radio and film ads that targeted the unmotivated German people. One example (source 9, p.372) targets women, and the Nazi emphasis on true German families. Another poster (source 10, p.372) depicts the ideal image of German strength; fighting men. Effective ad campaigns created an atmosphere of fear mixed with hope – the posters depicting what the German people should be doing to strengthen their country. By manipulating media, the Nazis proved that effective propaganda combined with brute force won elections. As an American observer wrote on the Nuremburg rallies, he noticed how easily Hitler commanded attention:

He (Hitler) is restoring pageantry and colour and mysticism to the drab lives of twentieth century Germans. In such an atmosphere no wonder, then, that every word dropped by Hitler seemed like an inspired word on high (source 18, p.379).

Often, Nazi propaganda was aimed at groups Hitler blamed for Germany’s economic woes. Much early propaganda from the 1920s portrayed communists and Jews as standing in the way of German re-mobilisation. All the posters shown in the text make reference to what was wrong with Germany and the Nazi solutions to German problems. One poster depicts the German workers stifled by a Jewish elite (source 8, p.371); targeted because Jews were predominantly involved in signing the Treaty of Versailles, which forced Germany into economic depression.

The effectiveness of propaganda at encouraging anti-Semitism became a motivating factor, as did propaganda denouncing communism. The Nazis deliberately organised rallies in working-class areas where communist support was strong; for example the Pharus rally in source 7, page 370. In doing so, the Nazis demonstrated physical strength, implying that Hitler was prepared to use force to sway votes. By scapegoating these groups, Hitler effectively focused the emotions of the German people on ridding the nation of these anomalies. The German people willingly conformed to the Nazi ideal because of the massive amounts of propaganda inundating their daily lives. As Hitler wrote, effective propaganda “must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan” (source 1, p.365).

In the formation of the S.A., Hitler therefore created a ‘marching propaganda machine.’ The S.A. stood as a symbol of what power Germany had the potential to gain if the nation were to unify and present a single, organised front. However, the S.A. also acted as an enforcer both physically and psychologically as Hitler was enlisting support. Hitler wrote that:

The masses love a commander more than a petitioner and feel inwardly more satisfied by a doctrine, tolerating no other beside itself, than by the granting of liberalistic freedom with which, as a rule, they can do little, and are prone to feel that they have been abandoned. All they see is the ruthless force and brutality of its calculated manifestations, to which they always submit in the end (source 2, p.366).

As seen in source 4, p.368, a directive issued to the troops emphasises further the intent of Nazi politics:

The S.A. will appear in public only in closed formation. This is at the same time one of the most powerful forms of propaganda. The sight of a large number of men inwardly and outwardly uniform and disciplined makes the deepest impression on every German and speaks a more convincing and inspiring language to his heart than speech, logic, or the written word is ever capable of doing.

It is clear from this directive which direction Hitler intended to take the Nazi party. Hitler’s astute view of the masses shows how well he fully understood the use and effect of propaganda. In essence, the omnipresence of Hitler and the S.A. is evident in all forms of propaganda he utilised to create an almost mythical image. However, the near total success of Nazi propaganda is seen in the enormous amount of voter popularity Hitler earned. Hitler created a charismatic self-image through continual reinforcement of the ‘Furher Myth’, which in extreme cases could be considered deification. The success of election propaganda was dependent on how effectively Hitler could appear as the only choice for leading the German people. Hitler promised to solve problems common to the everyday citizen, and for the most part kept his promises. The self-promoting image of one strong leader to lead one unified nation created a national fervour.

By effectively stamping out all other opposition, and eventually banning any other opposing parties by 1933, Hitler gained total dominance over a population that looked to the leadership policies of national re-growth, glory, and military rebirth. Hitler’s insights regarding human psychology enabled him to apply propaganda to maximum effect. He realised that propaganda must become subliminal as part of the background, therefore part of life and thought. Propaganda became social thought, thereby appealing to the emotions of the German people over their intellect. As Hitler noted, rational thought could eventually be manipulated into what seemed common sense by persistence and consistence in propaganda. “Propaganda must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so-called intellect” (source 1, p. 365). Thus, the underlying reason to Nazi politics and the root of their power lay in the efficient and smart propaganda. “The art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses, and finding, through a psychologically correct form, the way to the attention, and thence to the heart of the broad masses”(source